

A Matter for the Boss? How Personalized Communication Affects Recipients' Perceptions of an Organization During a Crisis

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A crisis can pose a serious threat to an organization. Parties, NGOs, and companies alike need to secure their reputation when a crisis hits. When choosing an adequate crisis communication strategy, organizations must also decide who should communicate with the public. Although many organizations choose to place high-level executives such as the chairperson up front, few studies have analyzed the effects of personalized communication in times of crisis on an organization's image or reputation. In the current study, therefore, we conduct two experiments to investigate the effects of personalized crisis communication. We vary both the crisis type and the level of personalization. Our findings suggest that personalized statements have a more favorable impact on an organization's image than unpersonalized statements. Furthermore, statements from an organization's leader are perceived as most appropriate, followed by those from a spokesperson and unpersonalized statements.

Keywords: personalization, organizational communication, crisis communication, crisis management, reputation, leadership, experimental research

Individuals have always been a central part of politics and economics. The role of politicians and businesspeople, and especially the role of leaders, in political and economic processes has long been recognized (Gaines-Ross, 2000; Holtz-Bacha, Langer, & Merkle, 2014; Kaase, 1994; Park & Berger, 2004; Poguntke & Webb, 2005). The focus on individuals in communication is known as personalization. Political parties put their leaders up front while companies use CEO communication to engage with their stakeholders.

Recently, there has been considerable research interest in whether there is a trend toward more personalization. Studies have examined institutional personalization (e.g., Webb & Poguntke, 2005; Zerfaß, Verčič, & Wiesenberg, 2016; for an overview in political communication, see Balmas, Rahat, Sheaffer, & Shenhav, 2014) and media personalization (e.g., Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013; Brettschneider & Vollbracht, 2011; Park & Berger, 2004; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; for an overview in political communication, see Balmas

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et al., 2014). However, few scholars have investigated the effects of personalized communication on an organization's or institution's image (for exceptions, see Kruike-meier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013; Otto & Maier, 2016).

Effective communication can be crucial, particularly when an institution is in crisis. Party members embezzle funds, ministers secretly employ family members, CEOs hide problems, or sudden accidents occur. If such incidents become public, there can be tremendous effects on an organization's image and reputation (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2010). A crisis is defined as a reputational threat with a significant impact on the interaction between an organization and its stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). Research has shown that leaders are often in the focus of media coverage, presumably to demonstrate that the handling of the crisis is a high priority (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Brettschneider & Vollbracht, 2011; Eisenegger & Konieczny-Wössner, 2010). Therefore, organizations must treat crises as serious threats and apply effective crisis management (Barton, 2001; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). While many studies deal with the effects of different crisis response strategies and focus on what management or leadership says when facing a crisis, little is known about who should communicate with the public. Research does not explain how the perception of an organization is affected by whether a crisis response is given directly by the leader or by a spokesperson or whether the organization releases an unpersonalized statement. This question might depend on the type of crisis an organization faces. Coombs (2007) identifies different types of crisis based on the attribution of responsibility. The end-members of the continuum are victim crises characterized by weak attributions of responsibility (e.g., damage caused by natural disasters or false rumors) and preventable crises with very strong attributions of responsibility (e.g., violations of laws or regulations by management).

While the choice of an appropriate strategy depends on the type of crisis (Coombs, 2007), the nature of the crisis could also affect recipients' expectations. Building on previous research on personalization and crisis communication, we report the results of two experiments in which we investigate the effects of different levels of personalization and types of crisis on an organization's image and the attribution of responsibility.

The Concept of Personalization

Personalization is a popular concept (Adam & Maier, 2010; Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007) that has been extensively analyzed in the field of political communication (Adam & Maier, 2010; Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Kaase, 1994; Karvonen, 2010; McAllister, 2007; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012). However, there is still no general agreement on what exactly personalization means (Balmas et al., 2014; Hoffmann & Raupp, 2006; Van Aelst et al., 2012). One major problem within personalization research is the use of a broad range of conceptualizations and definitions. There is still no consensus on an exact definition (Adam & Maier, 2010), and the concept remains fragmented (Lengauer & Winder, 2013).

However, it is largely agreed that personalization refers to a trend (Brettschneider & Gabriel, 2002; Kaase, 1994; Karvonen, 2010) toward an increasing representation of individuals over time. Personalization in the context of political communication means a shift in focus from issues to people and at the same time away from parties toward individual politicians and political leaders (Adam & Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2010;

Santen & van Zoonen, 2009; Van Aelst et al., 2012). This understanding of personalization is not to be confused with the understanding in the context of customization of online content, for example, banner ads or recommendations. There seems to be a broad consensus that personalization may be situated in three areas—institutional, media, and behavioral personalization—and that it contains various subdimensions (e.g., Adam & Maier, 2010; Balmas et al., 2014; Langer, 2007; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012).

Van Aelst et al. (2012) review different conceptualizations, operationalizations, and findings to elaborate their own conceptualization of personalization. Based on the literature, they distinguish between two forms of personalization: individualization and privatization. Individualization describes how individuals have become a central focus of media coverage while institutions and organizations have become less relevant. Privatization refers to the description of people in high-level positions as ordinary persons; for example, the presentation of a party leader as a nature lover or as a passionate home handyman. Both dimensions can be divided into two subdimensions. That is, privatization may involve a shift either toward individuals' personal characteristics (nonpolitical/nonprofessional traits) or personal lives (private life and personal interests). For individualization, the shift is either toward the greater visibility of individuals in general or the more concentrated visibility of leaders.

When looking at the use of leaders in communication, we can draw from both political communication research and public relations research. Park and Berger (2004) find that coverage of CEOs in the four leading newspapers in the USA increased from 1990 to 2000. They also find evidence of increasingly positive reporting on CEOs. Brettschneider and Vollbracht (2011) look at the coverage of companies in Germany between 2002 and 2007 and find a general increase in topics related to management and the share of news coverage focusing on CEOs and other top executives. Zerfaß et al. (2016) examine the positioning of CEOs and other top executives in the public sphere. A majority of the analyzed companies positioned their CEOs and top executives, but only a minority guided these activities through a sound management process. Denner, Heitzler, and Koch (2018) find broad diversity in the media representation of CEOs in German news media articles. However, they find that rather strong personalization patterns are dominant: there is a strong focus on CEOs as leaders who are presented as individualists, planners, or spokespeople for the entire industry.

Political communication research can also contribute to the question of how leaders are perceived. Balmas and Sheaffer's (2013) longitudinal analysis shows that media coverage of foreign countries focuses increasingly on state leaders rather than on countries as a whole. Reinemann and Wilke (2007) analyze German press coverage of German elections, 1949–2005, and found no evidence of media personalization, probably because the main focus has always been on the chancellor. However, the introduction of televised debates has meant that characteristics such as appearance and media performance have become more important. Heffernan and Webb (2005) find evidence that general election campaigns in Britain have become more candidate centered, with parties offering leaders greater prominence in their campaigns.

Political and economic organizations may use personalization as a strategic tool by involving individuals (e.g., leaders or spokespersons) in their communication, thereby establishing a relationship between a cause (i.e., a crisis) and a responsible or affected person (Szyszka, 2010). Following the

assumption that the image of the leader can influence how partisan and stakeholder groups perceive and evaluate the organization, personalization may have a positive influence on perceptions in general (Brettschneider & Vollbracht, 2011). According to Fombrun (1996), an organization's reputation is built on the numerous individual images of the organization held by various stakeholder groups. Observers inside and outside the company associate these images with the company (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006). These images bring together stakeholders' reactions to the organization, which may differ among stakeholders in terms of valence (Fombrun, 1996).

The strategic use of individuals, especially leaders, in an organization's external communication is particularly important in crisis situations: When the leader is present and involved in external crisis communication, the crisis management appears more robust. This is especially helpful in situations where the integrity of an organization or its reputation is fundamentally at risk (Eisenegger, 2010; Eisenegger & Konieczny-Wössner, 2010; Imhof, 2010; Lucero, Tan Teng Kwang, & Pang, 2009). Research suggests that crisis communication managers hope to gain beneficial effects through individualized statements (i.e., Brettschneider & Vollbracht, 2011; Eisenegger & Konieczny-Wössner, 2010). We argue that individualized crisis communication emphasizes how seriously an organization is treating the critical incident. In turn, appearing to take crisis management seriously might positively affect public perception of the affected organization.

Crisis Communication

Crises can strike all types of organizations: political parties, city councils, family-run businesses, large retail chains, and listed companies. Well-reasoned crisis management can reduce the loss of an organization's reputation or image and can therefore palliate the aftermath of a crisis (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2010). To limit any potential damage, organizations may choose from a wide range of communication strategies (Benoit & Pang, 2008; Coombs, 2007, 2010). When determining an appropriate strategy, the organization must address a multitude of questions and issues. In addition to the actual content of a statement, organizations also need to address specific formal aspects—for example, the crisis history of the organization and its reputation (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011).

Coombs' (2007) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is one of the most applied and prolific theory-based approaches for dealing with crises through communication (Ma & Zhan, 2016). A crisis can be defined as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2007, p. 2). Following this definition, a crisis can be described as a reputational threat with a significant impact on the interaction between an organization and its stakeholders (Ulmer, 2001; Coombs, 2007). Based on attribution theory (B. Weiner, 1986; D. Weiner, 2006), SCCT links the crisis situation to specific crisis management strategies intended to protect the organization's reputation. Attribution theory assumes that individuals consider the causes of a particular crisis situation and decide to whom they should attribute blame (B. Weiner, 1986).

To react to these attributions, SCCT proposes a two-step process for selecting an appropriate crisis management strategy. The first step is to identify the extent to which the stakeholders hold the organization

accountable for the incident. The second is to consider the organization's crisis history and reputation as these two factors have an impact on how responsibility is attributed (Coombs, 2010). This attribution of responsibility can play a key role in shaping perceptions of the organization's reputation and stakeholders' emotions and, indirectly, their behavior (Coombs, 2010). To counteract any negative effects, an appropriate crisis management strategy should be used to influence stakeholders' perceptions in favor of the organization (Coombs, 2007).

For the first step, SCCT offers a systematization of crisis accountability and divides crisis types into three clusters. The victim cluster includes crises in which the organization itself is also a victim. In this case, stakeholders attribute minimal responsibility to the organization. Typical examples are rumors, natural disasters, and other external events that damage the organization. The accidental cluster includes crises in which the organization's actions leading to the crisis were unintentional, such as technical errors leading to a malfunction. Here, low or moderate responsibility is attributed to the organization. If an organization knowingly places people at risk, takes inappropriate actions, or violates laws and regulations, the crisis can be assigned to the preventable cluster, with a high attribution of responsibility (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Knowledge of the degree of responsibility stakeholders attribute to the organization is, among other factors, important in assessing the reputational threat of a crisis. If an organization bears the bulk of the responsibility for the crisis, there might be greater damage to its reputation, leading to angry stakeholders, declining customer loyalty, a poor public image, or a shift in the way stakeholders interact with the organization—for instance, through negative word-of-mouth communication (Coombs, 2007).

Therefore, organizations strategically try to protect their image in times of crises. In particular, crisis managers hope to gain positive effects through statements voiced by individuals (Brettschneider & Vollbracht, 2011; Eisenegger & Konieczny-Wössner, 2010). While individual statements might emphasize the serious treatment of a crisis, they can evoke positive effects on public perception and enhance the perceived image of an organization. Accordingly, we state the following hypothesis:

H1: Personalized statements have a more positive effect on recipients' perception of an organization's image than unpersonalized statements.

If organizations choose to use personalized statements in their communication, they also need to decide which individual should speak out on the issue. Following the conceptualization of Van Aelst et al. (2012), we can distinguish between different types of speakers. Personalized statements by the organizational leader clearly indicate a concentrated visibility as they show a focus on a high-ranking representative (Brettschneider & Vollbracht, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2012). In contrast, statements made by a more generic spokesperson lack this leadership focus and reveal a higher visibility of individuals in general. Unpersonalized statements do not focus on high-ranking representatives or individuals in general. Research on political communication often considers the visibility of a country's leader versus the visibility of the leader's party or the country as a whole (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007; Wilke & Reinemann, 2001). Studies in the field of corporate communications demonstrate that the CEO is frequently deployed as a high-ranking representative of a company in external communications. Purposeful positioning of the organization's leader, as a form of individualized, leadership-orientated personalization, might have a positive influence on the organization's reputation. This assumption

is reinforced by the strong link between a CEO's image and the reputation of the organization itself (Gaines-Ross, 2000; Mazur, 1999; Sauerhaft & Atkins, 1989). The intentional visibility of leaders can therefore be understood as an instrument to sharpen and enhance an organization's profile or image (Park & Berger, 2004; Szyszka, 2010) while at the same time simplifying the issue (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013). If not the leader, it is likely that an official spokesperson will represent the organization in a crisis situation. Although such spokespersons are well trained and skilled in public communication, we claim that the leader as the highest representative of an organization has a more positive influence on the organization's image. We therefore argue that the visibility of leaders enhances the perceived image of the organization more than the visibility of general representatives, such as spokespersons. Accordingly, we pose the following hypothesis:

H2: A personalized statement from an organization's leader has a more positive effect on an organization's image than a personalized statement by a spokesperson.

According to SCCT (Coombs, 2007) an organization's crisis communication strategy needs to be appropriately adapted to the specific crisis to be effective. While Coombs (2007) refers mainly to the content of an organization's reaction, this need for specificity also applies to the formal aspects of crisis communication statements. Considering the high attribution of responsibility in preventable crises, the affected organization needs to show a great willingness for reparation to protect its public image and reputation. In the case of low or even no attribution of responsibility, a smaller effort might be made to repair and protect the organization's image. In addition, the SCCT implies that a suitable and rapid response from the organization is essential in crisis communication. However, it is not only the content and speed of the response that are crucial: who communicates the crisis statement is also important (Arpan, 2002). Here, the choice of speaker should be adjusted to the severity of the crisis (Troester, 1991). In the event of severe corporate crises, CEOs often become the voice of the organization as they are perceived as credible moral authorities (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001). Corresponding to this, findings by Lee, Kim, and Wertz (2014) indicate that crisis statements given by the CEO could reduce perceived organizational crisis responsibility in cases of severe crises. These effects can be explained by the organization's high commitment to alleviate the consequences of a crisis transported by the CEO statement (Lee et al., 2014). In cases of victim crises, such a high commitment might be perceived as not necessary or even inadequate. Thus, the expounded positive effects of personalized communication should have a stronger effect on an organization's perceived image in a preventable crisis:

H3: Personalized statements have a more positive effect on an organization's image in the case of a preventable crisis than in the case of a victim crisis.

By choosing a certain speaker to voice a personalized statement in a crisis situation, the organization might also influence the way the public perceives and attributes responsibility for critical incidents (Szyszka, 2010). However, we believe a spokesperson is held less responsible for the critical incident as he or she is perceived only as a disseminator of information. We therefore state the following hypothesis:

H4: Recipients attribute more responsibility to an organization's leader than to a spokesperson.

In addition to the effects of crisis statements on the organization's image and attribution of responsibility, it is crucial to know whether such statements are perceived as appropriate. By appropriate we mean that the statement is perceived as suitable for responding to a crisis. Since an individual person gives the rather anonymous organization a "face" and provides an emotional touch for the communication (Brettschneider & Vollbracht, 2011; Park & Berger, 2004), we conclude that a personalized statement might help make a crisis response more appropriate: While the reputation of a representative can help shape the perception of an organization (Men, 2012; Sohn, Weaver Lariscy, & Tinkham, 2009), communication by the representative—that is, the organizational leader or a spokesperson—in a crisis context should evoke the impression of serious crisis management.

H5: In crisis communication, personalized statements are perceived as more appropriate than unpersonalized statements.

The assumed effects are based, in part, on the positive impact of the image of the organization's leader on the perception of the organization (Gaines-Ross, 2000; Mazur, 1999). Conversely, the question arises as to how the appearance of the organization's leader in crisis communication affects the public perception of the leader. Alsop (2004) suggests that the image of an organization's leader is inseparably linked to the image of the organization. However, few studies have addressed how personalized statements affect the image of an organization's leader in different crisis scenarios. On the one hand, statements given by the leader could convey the impression that the crisis is being handled in a serious manner (Lucero et al., 2009) and thus will positively enhance the leader's image. On the other hand, there might be the risk of transferring negative effects from the crisis to the leader. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: How do personalized statements affect the image of an organizational leader in different types of crisis?

Method

Overall

We conducted two experiments in Germany. In both experiments, we used a 2 (crisis type: preventable vs. victim) × 3 (personalization: not personalized/spokesperson/leader) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six versions of a fictitious news article. In Experiment 1, participants read an article about the temporary ineffectiveness of a vaccine. The article mentioned the cause of the problem, a failure in the cold storage of either the (fictitious) manufacturer itself or an external supplier (factor 1). The organization published a press release that included statements from (a) the organization, (b) a spokesperson, or (c) the CEO as the leader of the organization (factor 2). In Experiment 2, participants read an article dealing with the failed construction of a children's daycare center. The cause of the failure was either a bureaucratic mistake made by the responsible (fictitious) local council or an external law firm (factor 1). Similar to Experiment 1, the council published a press release including statements either from (a) the council, (b) a spokesperson, or (c) the mayor as the leader of the council (factor 2).

Stimuli

In the first experiment, participants read an article describing a crisis situation at a (fictitious) pharmaceutical organization, Prinox. The article criticized Prinox because a batch of its vaccine against mumps, measles, and rubella had been found to be ineffective. A breakdown of the refrigeration system was cited as the reason for its ineffectiveness. We chose this crisis scenario because it could be presented either as a victim crisis or a preventable crisis with just minor changes to the article; that is, the failed refrigeration system belonged either to Prinox itself or to an external supplier. To highlight this aspect, we varied the heading as well as two sentences in the first paragraph of the article. All other information on the crisis scenario was identical throughout all article versions.

In the second experiment, the presented news article described a crisis situation in a (fictitious) municipality called Neustadt. The article describes the failed construction of a planned daycare center for children that could not be built because of a bureaucratic failure. For a two-month period, the local council had the right of first refusal on a centrally located piece of real estate. However, the council did not make use of the right and let the deadline pass. As a result, the city had to look for new land or face much higher costs. Again, this crisis scenario could plausibly be presented either as a victim or a preventable crisis. In the case of the victim crisis, an external law firm specializing in real estate let the deadline pass as a result of understaffing. In the case of the preventable crisis, the relevant council meeting did not reach a quorum, and therefore could not approve the land purchase, because many councilors were absent owing to an upcoming holiday. All other information on the crisis scenario was identical throughout all versions of the article.

As a second factor, we manipulated the level of personalization in both experiments. In the case of the unpersonalized condition, the organization issued the statement (Experiment 1: Prinox; Experiment 2, Neustadt council). In the two personalized statement scenarios, a representative of the organization personally issued the statement. In Experiment 1, the representative was either the CEO or a spokesperson for Prinox; in Experiment 2, it was either the mayor of Neustadt or a spokesperson for the council. In all three cases, the article quoted the representative or the organization several times. If the leader or the spokesperson was quoted, the article stated the person's name (the same name was used in each condition to exclude any interference effect) and repeatedly referred to his or her position (spokesperson or leader) within the organization. Except for the named descriptions, the statements were identical in all versions of the article.

At the end of the study, we provided extensive debriefing. All participants were informed about the actual purpose of the investigation, the fictitiousness of the case was clarified in detail, and we apologized for the (necessary) deception.

Measures

Organization's image. We relied on Koch, Denner, Viererbl, and Himmelreich (2019) for measuring the organizational image. We adopted the items competent/incompetent and professional/unprofessional but replaced qualified/unqualified with reliable/unreliable. Consequently, we measured the organizational

image using three 5-point semantic differential scales (competent–incompetent, reliable–unreliable, professional–unprofessional) and used these to form an index (Experiment 1: $M = 2.25$, $SD = 0.97$, $\alpha = .86$; Experiment 2: $M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.89$, $\alpha = .86$).

Appropriateness of communication. Participants rated the appropriateness of communication on a 5-point semantic differential scale (appropriate–not appropriate; Experiment 1: $M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.31$; Experiment 2: $M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.40$).

Attribution of responsibility. We measured the attribution of responsibility for the crisis separately for each player (organization, leader, and spokesperson) using a 5-point scale from 1 “no responsibility at all” to 5 “full responsibility” (Experiment 1: $M_{\text{organization}} = 4.22$, $SD_{\text{organization}} = 1.02$; $M_{\text{leader}} = 3.55$, $SD_{\text{leader}} = 0.97$; $M_{\text{spokesperson}} = 1.68$, $SD_{\text{spokesperson}} = 1.35$; Experiment 2: $M_{\text{organization}} = 4.03$, $SD_{\text{organization}} = 0.89$; $M_{\text{leader}} = 3.10$, $SD_{\text{leader}} = 1.02$; $M_{\text{spokesperson}} = 1.70$, $SD_{\text{spokesperson}} = 0.95$).

Image of the organization's leader. We used the same items that we used to measure the organizational image but replaced reliable/unreliable with capable/uncapable since we found it more suitable for measuring the image of a person. We measured the image of the organization's leader with three items using 5-point semantic differential scales (competent–incompetent, capable–not capable, professional–unprofessional) and formed an index ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.69$, $\alpha = .80$).

Participants

For Experiment 1, we recruited 211 participants (61% female; $M_{\text{Age}} = 31.5$, $SD = 11.9$) via social media. For Experiment 2, we recruited a student sample of 279 participants (72% female; $M_{\text{Age}} = 20.91$, $SD = 1.96$) in several classes at a university.

Manipulation Check

We checked whether our manipulation of both independent variables was successful. For the personalization factor, we asked participants whether a spokesperson, the leader, or the organization was cited in the article. In both experiments, 86% responded correctly (Experiment 1: $\chi^2(6) = 319.67$, $p < .001$; Experiment 2: $\chi^2(4) = 348.15$, $p < .001$). For the crisis type, we asked participants where the refrigeration breakdown or the bureaucratic failure occurred. In Experiment 1, 88% of the participants gave the correct answer corresponding to their assigned experimental group ($\chi^2(3) = 128.16$, $p < .001$), while in Experiment 2, 94% of the participants gave the correct answer ($\chi^2(2) = 233.08$, $p < .001$).

Results of Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we investigated how the type of crisis and the degree of personalization affected the organizational image, the perceived appropriateness of the organization's communication, and the attribution of responsibility in a corporate setting.

Effects on the Organization's Image

To analyze the effects of our treatment on an organization's image, we calculated a two-way ANOVA. The analysis showed a significant main effect of crisis type on the organization's image, $F(1, 205) = 20.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Recipients perceived the organization's image more positive in a crisis where it was perceived as a victim ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.99$) than in a preventable crisis for which it could be held responsible ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.88$).

Moreover, personalization had a significant main effect on the organization's image, $F(2, 205) = 5.91$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$. The post-hoc test revealed that a personalized statement by the CEO ($M_{CEO} = 2.76$, $SD_{CEO} = 0.97$) and by the spokesperson ($M_{spokesperson} = 2.55$, $SD_{spokesperson} = 0.98$) led to a more positive perception of the image than an unpersonalized statement ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.92$). Thus, H1 is confirmed. However, there was no significant difference between the personalized statements made by the CEO and the spokesperson ($p > .05$). Therefore, we reject H2.

We found no significant interaction effect for our two experimental factors, $F(2, 205) = 1.82$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$. There seemed to be no interaction between the effects of crisis type and level of personalization on the organization's image. H3 is therefore rejected.

Effects on the Attribution of Responsibility

According to H4, recipients should attribute more responsibility to the organization's leader than to a spokesperson. To test this assumption, we calculated a repeated measures ANOVA to control for the crisis type and degree of personalization. Comparison of the means for the two persons revealed considerable differences, $F(1, 205) = 391.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .66$. In both crisis scenarios and independent from the degree of personalization, recipients attribute more responsibility to the CEO ($M_{preventable} = 3.28$, $SD = 1.38$; $M_{victim} = 3.81$, $SD = 1.28$) than to the spokesperson ($M_{preventable} = 1.73$, $SD = 0.97$; $M_{victim} = 1.63$, $SD = 1.01$). Thus, H4 is supported.

Effects on the Perceived Appropriateness of Crisis Communication

Finally, we analyzed the effects of crisis type and personalization on the perceived appropriateness of the crisis communication. The analysis showed no significant main effect of crisis type on the perceived appropriateness of the statement, $F(1, 205) = 1.96$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$. The perceived appropriateness was not affected by whether the crisis was presented as a victim crisis ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.24$) or a preventable crisis ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.36$). However, there was a significant main effect of personalization, $F(2, 205) = 15.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$, on the perceived appropriateness. When the article cited the CEO's personal statement, perceived appropriateness was higher ($M_{CEO} = 3.76$, $SD_{CEO} = 1.22$) than when it cited a spokesperson ($M_{spokesperson} = 3.27$, $SD_{spokesperson} = 1.23$) or when it cited no individualized statement ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.23$). Post-hoc tests showed significant differences among all three groups. Therefore, H5 is confirmed.

Results of Experiment 2

Experiment 2 replicated Experiment 1, but used a political context. Again, we investigated how the type of crisis and the degree of personalization affected the image of the organization, the perception of whether the organization's communication was appropriate, and the attribution of responsibility. We also measured whether our experimental factors affected the perceived image of an organization's leader.

Effects on an Organization's Image

The analysis showed a significant main effect of crisis type on the organization's image, $F(1, 273) = 118.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$. Recipients perceived the image more positively when the organization was presented as a victim ($M = 2.87, SD = 0.85$) than in a preventable crisis where the organization could be held responsible ($M = 1.91, SD = 0.64$).

Furthermore, personalization had a significant main effect on the organization's image, $F(2, 273) = 4.21, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that a personalized statement by the mayor ($M_{\text{mayor}} = 2.57, SD_{\text{mayor}} = 0.94$) led to a more positive image than a statement given by the spokesperson ($M_{\text{spokesperson}} = 2.28, SD_{\text{spokesperson}} = 0.92$) or an unpersonalized statement ($M = 2.31, SD = 0.78$). This only partly confirms H1. There was a significant difference between the statement given by the mayor and the personalized statement by the spokesperson ($p < .05$), thereby providing support for H2.

As prior, we found no significant interaction effect for our two experimental factors, $F(2, 273) = 0.46, p > .05, \eta^2 = .01$. Consequently, our results revealed no relation between the effects of crisis type and level of personalization on the organization's image. We therefore reject H3.

Effects on the Attribution of Responsibility

H4 postulates that recipients attribute more responsibility to an organization's leader than to a spokesperson. Again, we calculated a repeated measures ANOVA to control for the crisis type and degree of personalization. Comparison of the means for the two persons revealed considerable differences, $F(1, 266) = 257.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = .49$. In both crisis scenarios and independent from the degree of personalization, recipients attribute more responsibility to the mayor ($M_{\text{preventable}} = 3.21, SD = 1.01; M_{\text{victim}} = 2.98, SD = 1.03$) than to the spokesperson ($M_{\text{preventable}} = 1.73, SD = 0.97; M_{\text{victim}} = 1.71, SD = 0.93$). Thus, H4 is supported.

Effects on the Perceived Appropriateness of Crisis Communication

Next, we analyzed the effects of crisis type and personalization on the perceived appropriateness of the crisis communication. We found a significant main effect of crisis type on the perceived appropriateness of the statement, $F(1, 266) = 5.34, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$. The communication was perceived as more appropriate in the case of a preventable crisis ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.00$) than in the case of a victim crisis ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.19$).

We also found a significant main effect of the degree of personalization, $F(2, 266) = 3.04, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, on the perceived appropriateness. Statements given by the mayor ($M_{\text{mayor}} = 3.50, SD_{\text{mayor}} = 1.07$) or a spokesperson ($M_{\text{spokesperson}} = 3.51, SD_{\text{spokesperson}} = 1.08$) were perceived as more appropriate than statements given by the council ($M_{\text{council}} = 3.16, SD_{\text{council}} = 1.14$). Hence, H5 is confirmed.

Effects on the Perception of an Organization's Leader

Finally, we analyzed how the crisis type and the degree of personalization affected the perception of an organization's leader (RQ1). We found no significant main effect of the type of crisis on the perceived image of the organization's leader, $F(1, 272) = 2.95, p > .05, \eta^2 = .01$. Hence, the perception of the leader did not differ between a victim crisis ($M = 2.66, SD = 0.70$) and a preventable crisis ($M = 2.53, SD = 0.69$). However, there was a significant main effect for the degree of personalization, $F(2, 272) = 21.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$. A statement given by the mayor ($M_{\text{mayor}} = 2.96, SD_{\text{mayor}} = 0.75$) affected the image more positively than a statement given by a spokesperson ($M_{\text{spokesperson}} = 2.38, SD_{\text{spokesperson}} = 0.59$) or an unpersonalized statement ($M_{\text{council}} = 2.46, SD_{\text{council}} = 0.59$). There was no significant interaction between the two factors, $F(2, 272) = 0.41, p > .05, \eta^2 = .00$.

Discussion

In two experiments this study examined the effects of personalized crisis communication on recipients' perception of an organization and its leaders by varying both the crisis type (preventable vs. victim crisis) and the level of personalization. The findings show that the image of an organization is assessed more positively when the crisis communication was personalized. This is especially the case when statements are made by the leader of an organization. Thus, it seems to pay off if CEOs personally convey messages in crisis situations.

Both experiments revealed consistent findings depending on the type of crisis: In the case of a preventable crisis, the organization is perceived more negatively than in the case of a victim crisis. Furthermore, consistent with Coombs (2007), our results confirm that recipients attribute more responsibility to an organization and its representatives in the case of a preventable crisis. However, there was no interaction effect between the crisis type and the degree of personalization on the organization's image. This leads us to conclude that the effects of individualized statements do not depend on a specific crisis type. Conversely, individualized crisis communication does not annul the effects arising from the attribution of responsibility for different types of crisis. The effects of perceived responsibility appear to be so strong that they cannot be overcome by communication-style factors such as individualized statements.

Because the attribution of responsibility plays an important role in crisis communication (Coombs, 2007), we took a closer look at who is held responsible in a crisis situation. As hypothesized, recipients attributed significantly less responsibility to the spokesperson than to an organization's leader. Even if this finding seems not surprising at first, the strength of the effect is quite remarkable: While recipients attribute a lot of responsibility to an organization's leader, both in the case of a preventable crisis and in the case of a victim crisis, the spokesperson is not held responsible. It seems that spokespersons are perceived as professional representatives who fulfill their duty by informing the public but are not the persons to blame

if something goes wrong in an organization. It might be that spokespersons are not perceived as part of the management and, hence, are not seen as having management responsibilities. This is particularly interesting as communication is often defined as a unique management function—recipients, however, seem to perceive spokespersons as minor employees.

In the appropriateness of the communication, we found that an individualized statement from the leader was perceived as most appropriate, followed by a spokesperson's statement and an unpersonalized statement. This is in line with our theoretical assumptions: If the leader is central to the organization's communication in a crisis situation, stakeholders and the public are more likely to consider the organization to be taking the crisis seriously if the leader is placed up front (Lucero et al., 2009; Ucelli, 2002). Other, nonleadership representatives also convey the impression of strong crisis management, at least in comparison with unpersonalized statements.

Our findings on the effects on an organization's leader's image indicate that statements issued by the leader have a more positive impact on the public's perception of the leader than statements voiced by a spokesperson or the organization. Apparently, personal statements emphasize the leader's competence and convey that both the company and the leading executives are taking the management of the crisis seriously. Hence, personalized crisis statements can enhance both the image of the organization and the perception of its leaders.

Overall, we find evidence that individualized statements may help an organization maintain its image and improve the perception of its communication style. These positive effects of personalization are independent of the particular type of crisis. An organization can express its serious approach to crisis management through the use of individualized communication. In addition, statements given by the leader of an organization positively enhance the public's perception of the leader.

Thus, our findings support the idea that personalized crisis statements can be used as a strategic tool in crisis communication. Statements voiced by the CEO or other organization leaders evoke particularly positive effects on the perceived image of an organization. Although these effects are not affected by the type of crisis, the results contribute to the understanding of public perception processes in crisis communication. While Lee, Kim and Wertz (2014) show that statements voiced by the CEO could significantly lower public attributions of crisis responsibility, our study indicates similar favorable effects for the perceived image of both the organization and its leader. In terms of crisis responsibility, our findings show substantial differences among actors that should be further investigated in future studies.

Regarding the interpretation of our results, we must consider a number of limitations. First, our experiment focused on the specific dimension of individualization, and thus we can only draw conclusions concerning this particular aspect of personalization. No inference can be drawn on how the privatization dimension affects the perception of an organization in crisis. Future research should address the question of how different types of personal information change the perceived image of an organization: does the effect depend on whether the information refers to personal characteristics (e.g., competence and performance) or to the details of an individual's personal life? Furthermore, to test the effects of leadership-oriented individualization versus the general visibility of individuals, we chose to operationalize these

subdimensions using the leader and a spokesperson. Although the appearance of such players in public corporate statements tends to be common and externally valid, the findings do not necessarily apply to other public speakers. Further studies should test whether the use of different representatives for the two forms of individualization leads to different results, for example by comparing a board member with an ordinary employee. Likewise, further studies should focus on the question of how different personalities and personal backgrounds influence the effects of personalized crisis statements. Our study used fictitious organizations and leaders, and thus the recipients did not have any preexisting attitudes toward them. However, different characters are likely to evoke different public perceptions that interact with the effects of personalized crisis communication statements. This is particularly relevant against the background of the image transfer between an organization's leader and the organization itself.

The second limitation is that the specific topics of the chosen crisis scenarios reduce the generalizability of our results. Other scenarios might alter the effects reported here and should therefore be explored in future research. As varying degrees of involvement would be expected, follow-up studies could focus on personal involvement and sociodemographic variables, which might even enhance the effects of different crisis communication strategies. For example, if the issue of the crisis is important to the participants, they might process the information differently. Our subjects were comparatively young, so their perceptions probably differed from those of older recipients, especially with regard to the crisis scenario of Experiment 2.

Third, when measuring attitudes (i.e., perceived image), experimental designs cannot take into account the long-term image-building process. Our study measures the perceived image directly after the reception of a single stimulus representing a totally fictitious scenario. Thus, the subjects' perceptions were based on a single exposure. These limitations could be addressed using research designs that include multiple measurement points and/or several exposures to acts of corporate communication.

Fourth, we used single-item measures for appropriateness of communication as well as for attribution of responsibility. A multi-item measurement would have been more precise. Additionally, a single item is also limited in its capability to provide enough points of discrimination, and we cannot display if the one-item measurements are reliable. In future studies, the measurement of those two items should be further elaborated, and multi-item scales should be used.

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2042 Nora Denner, Benno Viererbl, and Thomas Koch International Journal of Communication 13(2019)

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